A BIRD PHOTOGRAPHER'S MUSINGS FROM KASHMIR.

BY

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PART II.

(*Continued from* vol. 46, p. 103.)

On Jheel and Marshland

(*With* 9 *Plates*).

A visit to a jheel in Kashmir, immaterial whether it be large or small, produces volumes to interest a sportsman-naturalist. The grandeur of its mirrored scenery, the dense reed-beds, frigid or steamy according to season; and the toilsome marshy reaches are attractive and exhilarating. Finally the wealth of bird life affords unique opportunities of unravelling some new secret in nature still locked in obscurity.

The Dabchick, Purple Moorhen and White-eyed Pochard with a handful of mallard and coot, are perhaps the only residents on our jheel though throughout the year its bird life is abundant. During the shooting season duck of a dozen different varieties have been identified from bags made on it, while the marshy strips along its margin are favoured by the Common or Fantail snipe.

Rapacious harriers quarter the jheel, and undeterred by the fusillades of shikaris, swoop down into the reeds and play havoc with wounded birds, leaving but mangled mutilated messes for the eager beater to collect. Another nuisance raider, Pallas's Fishing Eagle, a fine large handsome dark brown bird, easily recognisable by its buff coloured head and neck, and the broad white band across the tail, proclaims its presence by its unmistakable raucous shriekings. It will be seen seated on some stump or mound along the margin of the jheel, or in hurried flight, endeavouring to snatch illegal booty carried away by a harrier; or swooping audaciously to carry off spoils from within reach of the sportsman's gun.

Beyond a small number of assorted waders, the visitors to the jheel, more commonly seen, belong to the fishing fraternity. The Night Heron, so shy and secretive by nature, is startled from its siesta in the dense reed beds; its larger cousin the Grey Heron, erect, motionless and seemingly asleep, makes its unerring dagger thrust to spear fish or frog unwarily encroaching in its preserves.

Before concluding this impression of winter bird life on our jheel, mention must be made of visits by the Large Indian Cormorant. Towards the commencement of the spring migration these birds are usually seen perched on some semi-submerged stump in the open basking in the sun, with wings extended, or perhaps

busy preening their feathers. Six was the largest number seen on any given date. Their fluctuating numbers and total disappearance by the end of April gives ground for the assumption that this jheel is used as a 'jumping off' point by the birds on their passage to distant breeding grounds.

A bright frosty day in the depths of winter holds many charms Much of the sting of its biting cold is subdued by the heat generated by a *Kangri*, placed on the floor boards of the *shikara*. Or one may hold a *kangri* in ones hands sheltering under a 'tent d' abri' formed by a rug covering the shoulders and reaching down to the floor of the canoe. This *kangri* it must be explained is an earthenware pot filled with a handful of live charcoal, copiously covered with ashes. It is the local form of heater; needs no attention and gives out welcome heat for hours on end.

Seated in this fashion, a start is made for the butt in the middle of the jheel which serves as a 'hide' to watch duck. Often the *shikara* has to be forced through a thick coating of ice, a man in the bows deftly cracking a passage with blows from his paddle. The uninitiated passenger has uncomfortable visions of possible disaster and considers what immediate action may become necessary should his frail bark founder. The boat's constant tussle with the sharp and jagged pieces of ice paint a menacing picture. Fortunately tragedies are few, and so not worthy of worry. Soon the open deep water is reached. Roosting duck and teal rise in a mass with a great clatter of wings. They circle round and gaining height, the various species forming separate parties, head away for quieter waters. There is no need for anxiety. Other parties of varying strength will drop in from the skies throughout the day, affording fine pictures to the concealed watcher as they float towards him, many with bills tucked away under wing, sound asleep. Drakes of the stately mallard, the streamlined pintail, the rare and immaculate Smew cheek by jowl with that curiosity the Stiff-tailed Duck, with its conical blue bill, are all represented. The tireless, plump, bob-tailed Dabchicks see to it that this concourse of duck does not fall into a deep slumber. They are kept constantly on the *qui vive* by disturbances caused by these playful birds. The game is a version of our 'hide and seek'. One bird, surfacing behind a sleeping duck in attempt at concealment is spotted by the other, who immediately, with a sharp trilling cry, gives chase, pattering along the surface of the water, half running, half swimming. The game continues *ad nauseam* all over the area. Like the Dabchick, the Coot is also a member of this mixed assembly. But they are placid birds, somewhat reluctant to fly, and not quite such a nuisance during the traditional hour of siesta.

As the shadows lengthen, the birds become distinctly restless as if awaiting a signal. Suddenly, with bewildering whir of wings, the whole community is in flight. It is the answer to the urge of yet another lifelong custom: the evening flight to their feeding grounds.

During the spring migration, April is an outstanding month for the bird-lover. At this time, Kashmir becomes an important

The Little Bittern.

pied-a-terre for a countless multitude of bird migrants. Summer visitors overlap belated winter ones, these again in their turn are augmented by a host of passage migrants from India breaking journey on their way through to the Far North. Bird life overcrowds the countryside and Kashmir's avian population is brought to its peak. Most of the lakes and jheels afford safe retreats and temporary rendezvous for these throngs. Yet even to this day, it can be asserted that the Wular Lake and its environments hold much of interest to the expert collector. There is every chance that some new species or some bird previously unknown to nest in this land, may be brought to the bag. To the uninitiated, bird-life at this season holds endless thrills. The galaxy of birds in full nuptial plumage becomes a kaleidoscopic pageant. Their song, though not as yet at full pitch, is pleasing to the ear. The waking world, with its verdant flower-studded landscape, soon helps to brush aside the dull monotony of silent and colourless winter.

April gives birth to a season of joy, to a promise of good hunting to all wanderers in nature's wilds.

For those who know Kashmir only as a luxurious playground, a warning—these outings are not made in one of those romantically trimmed, spring-seated *shikaras* of the Whoopee class—but in one much more spartan in type, uncanopied and hard to the touch. In spite of this, when wending ones way to a rendezvous, one gasps, at the surpassing loveliness of the scenery on this sequestered jheel, cut off from the hum of human bustle and surrounded by imposing mountains, snow-capped at this time of the year. The impelling beauty of the scene holds one's whole attention. The *shikara* is poled at first along a narrow passage cut through the dense reeds which cloth the margin of the jheel, but even from the lowly viewpoint, when the open water is reached, one is struck by the vivid and crystal-clear reflections thrown up from the limpid surface. The snow-capped mountains, the graceful clusters of willow trees and the border of dense reed beds are mirrored in minute detail. Further glory is added to the scene as the sun approaches the horizon and sunset tints add lustre to its loveliness. But there are unsought and distracting influences which mar one's enjoyment. The torment of flies by day is now replaced by the buzzings and bites from hordes of hungry gnats and mosquitoes, and should it become necessary to forage about a neighbouring marshy strip—beware of a particularly obnoxious 'jheel itch'—an unbearably irritating rash that sets the legs afire. The inflamation is apparently caused by the bites of myriads of microscopic organisms which shelter in the mud and slime of a rice field. Though warned by my shikari, the chance of getting a good series of pictures of Hodgson's Yellow-headed Wagtail, which chooses the banks dividing these fields for a nesting site, was too good to be missed. Besides his assumption that a 'two bath a day' wallah was just as prone to this infection as the great unwashed local, demanded correction. I paid no heed to his warning.

I soon discovered that it does not pay to shun local advice, the intolerable 'jheel itch' flared up that very evening and life became a burden for three long days. Yet my shikari was all

sympathy, and never by look or sign did he suggest an expected and infuriating 'I told you so'. Luckily it did not take long to discover an antidote. When questioned, the ryot explained that what looked like undiluted dirt caked over his legs was really the stain made by the application of a viscid fluid extracted from burning pine logs. It is used by the natives as a precaution against 'jheel itch' so prevalent in these marshes. Assuming this concoction to be some crude resinous extract, an ointment made up of a mixture of vaseline and essence of coal tar in the proportion of one teaspoonful of essence to one ounce of vaseline, was tried. It was found to be efficacious, and so this last but not least of 'horrors' was checked.

The present economic stress due directly or indirectly to the World War has made its mark even on birdland. Soaring prices of the mere necessities of life have forced the local inhabitant to go yet farther afield for materials used in local cottage industries. To meet the increased demand for such commodities partly attributable to the phenomenal influx of visitors to Kashmir, many of nature's strongholds, previously untapped, are now ruthlessly exploited to the detriment of bird life. For example on jheels, reed-beds are denuded for mat-making, grasses of all species for fodder; even submerged weeds are dragged up to serve as foundations for more floating gardens to supply a sufficiency of vegetables for the market. These activities are in full swing and coincide with the height of the breeding season when most birds are busy completing their fresh clutches.

As the eggs of most water birds are considered a delicacy in the villages, the impoverished local, to whom nothing is naturally negligible, adds destruction in the wake of his grass cutting.

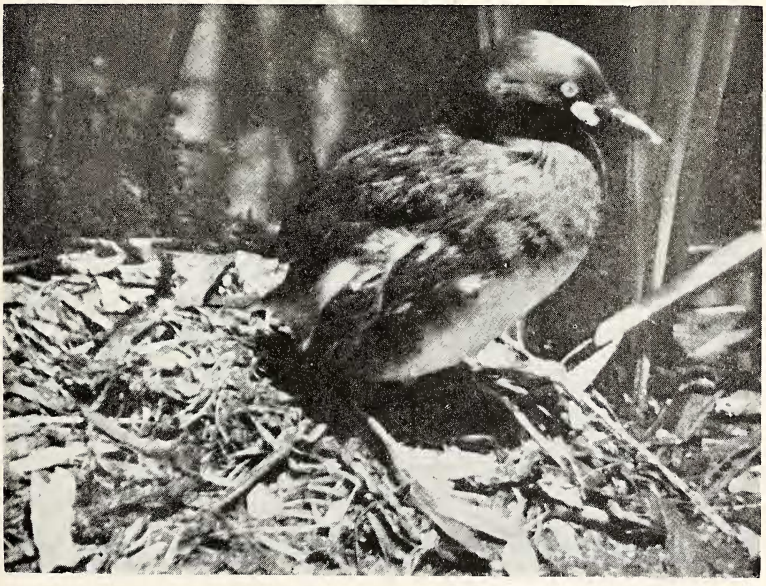
One is apt to forget that the animal world stands subservient to human needs, and so, when ensconced anxiously awaiting the quarry, one is apt to inveigh against a clamorous phalanx of reapers, slowly advancing, sickle in hand, denuding cover and destroying all that comes within reach. An ordeal not to be left out of reckoning during outings in May and June.

The bird Photographer's lot in the main necessitates hour on hour of patient watching, often, under trying conditions. The scorching sun, the stifling atmosphere inside the reed-bed—his temporary retreat—the infuriating flies and hordes of voracious mosquitoes are the constant discomforts falling to his lot on jheel or marsh.

The 'Hide method' of bird photography demands even greater personal discomfort from its disciples. One is couped up in a miniature tent which denies even the occasional zephyrs that bring relief to the man in the reed-bed. Further the restricted view obtainable through the peepholes, must tend in the long run to develop tired eyes and a likely squint for the rest of ones days.

To the naturalist however, there are many compensations to outweigh these hardships. Birds classed as 'inveterate skulkers' emerge before the eye at the closest of ranges uttering their grunts and groans, and fearlessly courting some seemingly disinterested

The Purple Moorhen.



The Dabchick.

The Indian Great Reed Warbler.

The Kashmir Paddy-Field Warbler.

mate. A pretty picture was made by a pair of those arch skulkers the Water Rail. It is a bird that can seldom be beaten out of its known haunts in the dense reed-beds or for that matter, even seen. Yet on the undisturbed, restricted playground, within a yard of my vantage point, it became evident that cooing doves did not surpass the love-making of this Rail, utter though it does the most discordant of mating calls. It was surprising to find that this small bird, a little over a foot in length, was responsible for such an amazing volume of sound which resembles, for want for a better simile, the noise made by the rumblings of an elephant's tummy: startling sound indeed in such solitudes. The strident metallic calls of the Great Indian Reed Warber uttered with persistance and vehemence and from every direction usually jars the nerves as the temperature rises. But as I have said the reed-bed offers its compensations. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that the Warbler proclaiming its presence from a perch within a foot of my head was an albino. Its whole plumage was a creamy white except for the faintest suggestion of its normal markings. Its salmon-red mouth and pinkish straw-coloured legs added tone to this fancy dress.

It neither appeared to be harried nor accompanied by any of its kind during its solitary flights from bed to bed throughout the day. I did not see it again during subsequent visits to the jheel.

There is always something of interest to attract attention throughout the long hours. A Bluethroat, a passage migrant to the Vale, sits and preens its plumage within arms length. That little jewel, the Common Kingfisher, exhibits the ease with which it swallows silvery fish; the dainty Whiskered Tern, with the accustomed grace of terns on the wing displays its purposeful, rythmic flight and the delicacy with which it picks its food from off the water or weeds. These are but a few examples of interest among a host of visual delights to be encountered throughout the day.

The birds of the marshes are a noisy community, their loud cacklings, grunts and hoarse rippling notes beggar descriptions; hardly a pleasing note can be picked up from this constant chorus of discords.

Every day from early May till late July there need be no dull moment for the bird-watcher from the time he sets foot in the *shikara* until his return to the shore. Birds in great variety are numerous and busily engaged in all the activities connected with breeding. The bustle, the exuberance of flight and emotional song reflect the spirit of the time and the joy of living.

In the following descriptions, species are not given scientific priority, but are grouped together in accordance with the surroundings in which their nests may be found:—in dense reed-bed, over open lily-covered water, in treacherous bog and marsh, or on the drier, less waterlogged reaches, clothed in a lighter type of reed, which borders marsh and paddy-field.

Although nests of the Mallard and White-eyed Pochard were frequently found, I did not risk disturbing them by my photography. It is hoped though to try conclusions with the Coot and

Common Snipe during the coming spring and summer, and thus complete a record of pictures of all the water birds known to breed on the jheels and contiguous marshlands in the Vale of Kashmir.

The Indian Little Grebe or Dabchick. *Podiceps ruficollis capensis.*

I have chosen the Little Grebe as my first subject, as it was the first water-bird to face the camera.

While the *shikara* was still in the distance the sitting Dabchick was seen to plunge into the water from the nest, but not before she had found time with a deft movement of the bill to cover up her clutch of eight dirty white eggs. All that was to be seen was an untidy mass of damp water-weed, half submerged and resembling stray drift accidently hitched up to the tufts of growing marsh stalks. A nest easily overlooked by unschooled eyes.

No drill had been evolved, the setting up of the apparatus took time; but when finally my viewpoint was reached, there was but a half hour's wait before the bird waddled up onto its platform nest. The act of uncovering its eggs was too much to miss, and so, the golden rule—never disturb a bird on its first appearance at the nest until it has comfortably settled down for a minimum period of half an hour—went by the board. As was anticipated, the click of the shutter caused a hasty dive, but again, not until the eggs had been covered. There followed a long wait before a further exposure could be made. In the meantime one could almost understand the jargon expressed in long drawn out descending trills as she passed the news of the disturbance on to her mate. It was quite an hour and a half before the male convinced his frightened spouse that she was unnecessarily alarmed. Eventually, by example and look he induced her to waddle on to the nest alongside him; indeed a reward for patience, for the shutter truly recorded this intimate scene. Now followed another tedious wait before their next return to the nest. When they did, one bird was seen to rush at the nest with wet weed in the bill, this was deposited, and further the nest was splashed with water, while the mean hen, afloat on the other side, made a rippleless dive and appeared again by the side of the male and screwing up courage once again waddled on to the nest. This final picture of her look of sheer boredom as she balanced herself on her curiously lobed feet was considered a sufficient reward for the long hours spent in the heat, and so the birds were left in peace to carry on the good work.

Another item of interest presented itself when the site was passed a couple of days later. A newly hatched chick was seen to splash off the nest into the water, and as to the manner born, swim away to the shelter of a bed of reeds, tweet-tweeting as it went.

In no illustration or description of the Dabchick in the current Indian bird books is mention made of the ivory-coloured, rosette-shaped wattles that grow on the cheeks at the base of the bill. These are regular adornments in breeding plumage.

The Purple moorhen. *Porphyrio poliocephalus.*

The Purple Moorhen together with its smaller cousin, the Moorhen, are among the most wily of fowl anywhere within the nesting area. The former only allowed six exposures to be made during 36 hours of sittings spread over a period of six days. Two shots in colour included in this small bag, failed to materialize in the processing. The Moorhen shows a record even blacker, for that bird evaded the camera entirely during sittings aggregating ten hours. It must however be admitted that although these birds are guaranteed to try the patience of Job nevertheless they form subjects well worthy of effort by Job's younger brother, the bird photographer.

Although success with the camera was meagre with *Porphyrio*, yet the wealth of knowledge gained of its habits well outweighed hardships and discomforts.

The identity of this bird, about the size of a local hen, is unmistakable. It has long ungainly red legs, a heavy red bill terminating in a frontal casque across the crown, a bizarre acoutrement which somewhat mars the beauty of its handsome purple blue-green plumage.

During my reconnaissance trip to the jheel, while moving along the narrow waterways cutting into the dense reed-beds, many platforms were seen near

the water's edge. These, I was assured, were made by the birds themselves, who sheared off stalks, some two feet above water level and entwining the cut off portions make a solid circular platform which is used for sunbathing, feeding, etc. The nest was invariably in such a position. Twisted blades of marsh grasses line the depression which take the eggs.

By the discovery of four of these nests in April C.6, C.5, C.5, C.4 and one in July C.5, it can now be stated that the Purple Moorhen breeds in Kashmir. The finding of the April nests on the 18th of the month came as a surprise, as the last duck shoot of the season took place on the 12th at a time when the nests were just completed, and the first egg at least laid in a couple of these. One nest was not more than 70 yards from the butt. The eggs are a larger edition of those of the Moorhen, spotted and blotched with shades of brown over a reddish-stone ground colour. The C.4 mentioned above contained a freak set of four pure white eggs, without blotch or speckle. The C.6 nest provided an interesting record, the sixth egg was laid in it on April 18th, the chicks commencing to hatch out on May 10th. All the nests found were in comparatively shallow water, and although a depth of eight feet was the most to contend with, it was often a struggle to find the bed of the jheel owing to a semisolid boggy obstruction that intervened. A sudden unexpected break through has been the cause of many a good ducking to the perilously poised sportsman in the bows of the *shikara*—a merry making picture to the spectator, but often implying the loss of camera accessories to the careless photographer.

The tale of my endeavours at photographing the Purple Coot is a tale of discomfort, aggravation and comparative failure. From my vantage point in the mosquito-ridden reeds, the birds could be seen or heard throughout the long vigils. Would either of them come into the focused area?—No; they were as though on 'Sentry go' patrolling the precincts, sedately picking their way along stray floating reeds, or awkwardly clambering up, hand over hand, to the top of the bed to gain a better view of the surrounding country. Their calls and cackles gave away their position throughout the long hours. Exasperated by these tantalizing tactics, I could not suppress my feelings any longer, and proclaimed my presence in plain speaking. The answer to my tirade from the nearest bird was both interesting and amusing. It stood its ground and with body drawn up to full height, clapped its wings with resounding cracks above its back, hooting a succession of hoarse expletives. Then it stalked off in its stilted way, flicking its tiny triangular tail in true waterhen fashion. Its loud chuckles as it disappeared into the safety of the reed beds made me feel that the bird had indeed won the first round.

My anxiety for the safe hatching of these eggs, often prompted me to end the uneven contest, but having been goaded into stubbornness by the seeming indifference shown by the birds for their eggs, I decided that even should may day-long sittings eventually addle the eggs, I would stick to my post until such time as the birds themselves deserted the nest. My shikari affiirmed that the Moorhen were not in the habit of brooding during daylight, leaving incubation to the hot rays of the sun. He further stated that the birds had often been seen taking up their duties at sunset over the apparently deserted nest, and not leaving it until the sunrays had gained strength in the morning. After my experiences, I favour this view; my day-long sessions at the nest did not interfere with the hatching out of the complete clutch.

After many fruitless hours of waiting I resorted to stratagem and thereby met with a certain amount of success. A horse-shoe shaped clearing, two feet wide was made, the nest resting midway between its two heels. All weeds were plucked up by their roots leaving a stretch of open water, except for a weedy causeway which was left undisturbed. This causeway was the normal runway used by the bird on its way to and from the nest. It was anticipated, that being lothe to fly, a skulker and an expert at threading its way through the dense reeds, the bird must eventually use the only land route in the nesting area. The resultant four pictures taken, depicts the bird in varying attitudes of unhurried movement.

My final day's outing on May 10th was, photographically speaking, in keeping with the succession of failures usually experienced in my pursuit of these birds. The bubble, that my 'horse-shoe' trick would ensure success, burst. The sound of a soft tweet from the reeds near the nest told its own tale, but imagine my delight on reaching the nest to find one chick struggling

to release the remaining portion of the shell from its nether regions, while another, with tiny beak protruding from the shell, was doing the like. The first chick, an all-black ball of fluff with tiny red legs and red patch on forehead, looked up and, either in answer to a soft tweet from its twin, already hidden in the reeds, or because the sun rays were uncomfortable, hobbled off to the edge of the nest, and hand over hand made for the shade, where it, in its turn, sat tweeting.

The Little Bittern. *Ixobrychus minuta.*

The Little Bittern is a minature heron, about the size of a partridge but with longer legs, greenish yellow in colour. The male bird is clothed in buff and black, the black portions changing to brown in the female. The bird gave very little trouble and posed freely before the camera. Though common in Kashmir in summer, they are seldom seen by day as they prefer the seclusion of the dense reed beds then. It is not until just before nightfall that they sally forth in numbers to take up the fishing stations in the shallow waters.

I was lucky in finding some that discarded these rules. One allowed my *shikara* to creep within photographic range and take a picture of it. Aroused by the click of the shutter, position No. 2, that of alarm, was assumed. In this position the bird brings into play the markings provided by Nature. The brown streaks along its thin long neck, now stretched taut with bill pointing to the sky, assimilate with the lined back-ground of reeds and obliterate the bird.

The nest is a shallow pad of grasses built in dense reed beds, or occasionally in a convenient fork of a semi-submerged willow tree, always near water level. Six to eight white eggs form the clutch. The nest chosen by me for operations was placed in a dense reed bed, standing in stagnant water, thigh deep.

The bird's glide—no other word describes its easy progress through the reeds—is truly remarkable.

The Indian Great Reed Warbler. *Acrocephalus stentoreus brunnescens.*

It is impossible to distinguish in the field between the numerous members of the large Warbler family, which contains a host of small brown birds without distinctive features. This Reed Warbler is an exception owing to its giant size. It is a little smaller than a Bulbul, its large bill and the rich salmon red mouth are seen if at close quarters, throughout the day as it gapes to deliver its unceasing metallic call. Its notes full of volume and exuberance are distinctive. Its Kashmir name *'Kak Karra Choo'* is a good imitation of a favourite stanza running through many other harsh squawks. I look upon him as a coarse fellow, in a family of fine cheery small people.

The bird is extremely common in summer. Its harsh notes betray its presence in every reed-bed in which it moves about with much skill. The bird is not a skulker in its literal sense. Often, at this season, it may be seen continuing its harangue from the reed tops unconcerned at the presence of a human within arm's length. Nor is it shy on its nesting ground and will allow a close approach.

Nests are ubiquitous and take the form of a massive, deep, cup-shaped affair, made of coarse grass but comfortably lined with finer grasses. They are suspended between reeds and stalks and attached to three or four of them about a couple of feet or so above water level. The clutch consists of four or occasionally five greenish eggs. These are speckled and clouded, mostly at the broad end.

Efforts to picture this bird do not present many difficulties. During my first attempt, the bird returned to its nest while I was still erecting the easily handled water-bird apparatus. But it must be admitted that it was slightly disturbed when I overbalanced and took a header into the water losing a valuable exposure meter in the process. It was not quite clear to me whether the squawks from the bird in the depths of the reeds meant to convey concern or laughter at the episode. Be that as it may, I soon finished off the successful morning's work by exposing a whole roll by hand, meeting no further inconvenience.

The Pheasant-Tailed Jacana.